



THE  
**HAMILTON**  
AND ALEXANDRA COLLEGE  
CONFIDENT FUTURES

## Principal's Address

*for Speech Day  
25 October 2024*

You can start your timers.

About two years ago I had a lot of people asking me – why are you going to Hamilton? There are schools in Melbourne which are bigger and closer, and who might be interested in talking to you, and where you might be a good fit. Why go all that way out to Hamilton?

I understand that most of you sitting here this afternoon didn't get to choose to come to this school; that's something that your parents decided for you. But I did choose to apply to work here, and I'd like to start this afternoon by talking about why.

When I was thinking about moving on from my previous school, Gemma and I were thinking not only of a school that might fit professionally, but we were by extension choosing a school for our children, Henry and Theo. Henry will hate me highlighting him, but he is sitting in this auditorium now as one of you, and I was choosing a school for him. I wanted a school where he would be known and encouraged, and where he would be pushed to improve, one small enough that he could sign up to all of the co-curricular opportunities and actually get a look in.

We found that school in The Hamilton and Alexandra College. The truth is there is no other school like ours. Not only in being a school of tradition and achievement, but being these things *right here* in a small regional centre like Hamilton. We are a school where students can aspire to achieve whatever they would dream, *and* can remain a part of their community and close to their family. I wanted to work in a school where my children know students older and younger than them, who are mentored in a choir or on the hockey field, and then will in turn have the opportunity to mentor younger students themselves. I went to a school of over 1300 students from Years 7-12, and I knew hardly anyone in year levels above or below. That meant that I missed the chance to genuinely be led by the student leaders, and then the opportunity to lead in my turn. I wanted to work in a school where the principal goes on camp and, more than just knowing the name of each student in school, actually comes to know each student as a person. I wanted a school where my

love for country music in general and the banjo in particular wouldn't necessarily be frowned upon. There are very few places where this is possible.

I sought to work at College because of what I gathered were the unique relationships between teachers and students, that are only possible in a smaller, regional school. Small is important because we each come to know each other well, and regional is important because of the cross over between school life and personal life. I'm not sure that they do, but I love seeing Harry Lyons or former students like Hettie Bourne when I have dinner at The Bunyip. I love that Humboldt served my pizza two weeks ago in Port Fairy. I love that our Year 8 students could give Jimmy, sorry, Mr Bell, a ribbing on camp at Mittagundi when he was hacking up a lung and seemingly on death's door. But I also love that those same Year 8 students will listen respectfully when they're in the pit in the front row and full view on Speech Day. I love that when P&F puts out a call for volunteers, over 50 people turn up to help mix Christmas cake ingredients.

You may not realise it – because the familiar becomes mundane, and because young people are often less than enamoured with their parents' choices and with their school – but these things *don't* happen everywhere. This is unique and this school is special. There are no other schools like College – a traditional, historic school in regional Australia achieving great outcomes, but where everyone can laugh together in yesterday's Year 12 assembly at George and Jack getting married, and actually know who they are and why that's funny.

Rosie spoke just before about Prof Donald Maclean, with whom we worked this year. One of his key messages is that strategy is strength. When thinking about the direction we collectively might take the school, this led us back to what we do well. Those things that attracted me to College in the first place are, of course, the great strengths of our school. I have tried to articulate our approach in wrapping it up in three key ideas:

*Nurture*

*Academic*

*Opportunity*

This the thing we do well, and these separately are the *things* we do well. My task today is answer the question of why these things matter, and why they matter *now*. We can put the framing question more broadly as:

*What might we do to ensure that every graduate of our College has the knowledge, skills and dispositions to not only be happy in their own life, but to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others?*

This the question I will attempt to answer over the next 15 minutes, or 9 minutes, 17 minutes, or 16 minutes 40 seconds, or so.

I am firmly convinced that we are answering that question, strongly, clearly, and with the proof in the growing and broadening experiences and successes of our students. We are answering that question now, even in the context of the challenges just laid before you.

### *Nurture*

I like the word 'Nurture' as opposed to pastoral care or wellbeing, as it carries a connotation of care with *growth*. When we nurture a plant, for example, we do so not merely to keep it alive, but so that it grows and flourishes. In my time at College I have seen many, many examples of the nurture that staff provide to students. They care for them so that they can grow, and have done so through the development of genuine relationships, through pushing students to try new and difficult things, and by inculcating the truth that others' wellbeing is more important than our own. Think of the way in which you are nurtured when the relationship you have with Mrs Cameron allows for some witty back and forth banter in Psych class. Or how you are nurtured when Mrs Ogle teaches your senior History class on a Friday and then swaps her whiteboard for a clipboard, and turns up every week at Pedrina Park to run netball. Or the way that Ms Kenna nurtured all of you who were in High School Musical, or the careful artistic guidance you received from Mrs James and Miss Reiher to produce the wonderful works on display in the foyer of this building.

Nurture is of course, not to be confused with pandering to students. Part of nurturing your growth is to correct you when you need correcting. To tell you off sometimes, is the best love we can show. So we will continue to do that when you slip below what's acceptable in a community like ours.

### *Academic*

I like the word 'Academic' because it carries connotations of the type of broad, non-specific, understanding of the world that will actually help you in life. Academic means a certain type of attitude, not a certain type of outcome. Most of you won't become scientists, but you will all benefit from the understanding of how scientific knowledge advances through falsifiable predictions and disproof. This is as useful watching a political debate as it is in the Chemistry lab, or when you're trying to reduce your micron count of the wool that you grow. Most of you won't ever analyse a literary text ever again, but all of you will benefit from the recognition that other people's emotions and responses are fairly similar your own. In recognising the familiar in a specific Shakespearean character for example, you plant the seed of recognition that others from different backgrounds or places, or races, are actually very, very similar to you.

We are an academically non-selective school, and so there are of you here today who might not feel that you fit the word ‘academic’. I would encourage you to consider the argument that academic is a mindset, not an outcome. It is way of viewing the world and new-ness with an inquisitive and disciplined approach. We value academic results, of course, but we value them because they are one of the rewards of an academic mindset, well applied. And even if you don’t always get the best academic results, that’s okay, because we are not educating just for ATAR, we are educating for an academic mindset of following your interests, and understanding the big ideas. We are educating for an attitude which for *some* of you will lead to great ATARs, but which, if accepted, will lead to a greater chance at satisfaction and enrichment for *all* of you.

To these ends, this year we have:

- achieve exceptional academic results, including in NAPLAN where we consistently higher than state and national averages, Tournament of Minds, ICAS competitions, the Australian Maths and History Competitions
- field students on the international academic and political stage at the Yale Model UN Conference in Brussels
- reintroduce the in-person VCE Revision Program for Year 12 students from College and surrounding schools
- and hold great hope for the academic results of our gradating Class of 2024.

### *Opportunity*

And finally, I like the word ‘Opportunity’. The story of College in 2024 is one of action. We have provided opportunities for you to compete, to participate, to serve, and to grow. As I am often reminded by staff and parents, we are an extremely busy school, and sometimes I receive the criticism that there are too many interruptions to lessons. But that critique is premised on the false assumption that lessons only happen in the timetabled class, when of course they don’t. Having access to world-class educational opportunities is at the heart of my commitment to you as students.

To these ends, this year we have:

- consulted with staff and students, engaged architects and developed concept plans for our new Mirranatwa property, beginning to consider what opportunities it will offer in your life as College students
- launched the fundraising campaign for construction of ‘The Wilma Hearn Arena’, a state-of-the-art indoor arena at our Equestrian Centre which will be completed in 2025

- launched the reimagined Year 9 Experience, including a three-week service and cultural immersion in Vietnam
- launched our 2025-2026 Co-curricular trips program which will provide international service, sporting and cultural opportunities on eight bespoke programs for Year 10 to 12 students
- presented sell-out productions of *High School Musical - On Stage!* and our first Junior School production, *Frozen Jnr!*
- Amongst many more rich opportunities here at school, in Hamilton, and in Melbourne and the rest of Victoria.

I believe that you benefitted from the opportunity to freeze in tents at Mittagundi. I believe that you benefitted from the opportunity to sweat it out in the humidity of our first Year 9 Experience trip to Vietnam. I believe that you benefitted from waking up in frozen swags and realising you didn't bring quite enough clothes to Central Australia. I believe that you benefitted when forced to stand up to address your intimidating committee of international geniuses as part of the Yale Model UN Conference in Brussels in March:

These opportunities are the specific examples of the broader exhortation to be involved and to learn from the world by being engaged with it. I believe that busy students are successful students and that we have an obligation to provide all the opportunities for improvement and excellence that we can in your short time at school. This year we might have had a year that was easier and calmer, but without the energy that we have enjoyed and benefited from.

I'd like now to zoom out briefly if I might, to think more broadly about how we ensure that every graduate of our College has the knowledge, skills and dispositions to not only be happy in their own life, but to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others.

Teachers and education academics argue a lot about what school should look like. We debate:

- Should we train for the specific skills demanded by technological advancement?
- Or become incubators for entrepreneurs and business thinkers?
- Or develop young people's already existing skills and knowledge about the specific industry that they are likely to end of working in?

All of these approaches have their merits and there are some excellent educational institutions delivering them to great effect, including right here in Hamilton. My concern, though, is that these approaches are tied very closely to the world of work. This raises a fundamental question for anyone

interested in schools and education: should all schools be only for preparation for *work*, or are they in some bigger sense preparation for *life*?

I am taken at the moment with the resurging idea in educational debate of ‘liberal education’. A liberal education is one which *liberates* young people from errors in thinking, and thereby gives them the *freedom* to pursue whatever life they might choose and work for, rather than equipping them for a specific path. A liberal education can be broadly summarised as one which:

- Develops and imparts broad knowledge about human history, cultures and the natural and physical world
- Explicitly develops intellectual skills of inquiry and analysis, public speaking, rhetoric and argument, information literacy, problem solving and teamwork
- Develops personal and moral responsibility by teaching about moral frameworks and ethics, and by demanding service of others.

Because it is not designed to equip a person for a *specific* work task, the strong implication of a liberal education is that knowledge has value in and of itself, and that education is worthy, not as a means to an end, but as a way of equipping yourself for whatever end you end up at. And the wonderful irony, in my mind, is that in learning things that are not immediately practical useful, we actually learn those things that will best equip us to be flexible thinkers and problem solvers able to deal with whatever is in front of us. A liberal education is about developing the tools to front up to the problems and challenges we come across, whatever they are, putting them in perspective and approaching them logically, armed with the best thinking of the best minds of history.

Philip Alvan Shribman, then a recent graduate of Dartmouth University, was 21 when he wrote to his brother who was 18 and about to enter College. In defence of just such a liberal education, he argued that:

*“What you’ll learn in college won’t be worth a God-damned. But you’ll learn a way of life perhaps—a way to get on with people—an appreciation perhaps for just one thing: music, art, a book—all of this is bound to be unconscious learning—it’s part of a liberal education in the broad sense of the term.*

*“In a liberal school you know ‘nothing’—& are ‘fitted for nothing’ when you get out. Yet you’ll have a fortune of broad outlook—of appreciation for people & beauty that money won’t buy—You can always learn to be a mechanic or a pill mixer etc.,” but it’s only when you’re of college...that you can learn that life has beauty & fineness.”*

Shribman wrote this in the midst of WWII while serving on the supply ship USS Crescent City. Later that year amidst the carnage and loss of the Guadalcanal campaign, he wrote to a former professor at Dartmouth, reflecting:

*“A decent liberal arts education based on the Social Sciences is all a lot of us have left—and more and more becomes the only possible background on which to view all this”*

It now increasingly falls to schools like ours to make Shribman’s unpopular argument that what becomes both most meaningful to us in our individual lives, and most beneficial to us collectively, are the biggest and broadest ideas.

Broad ideas such as sacrifice for others, and ethical behaviour, and the virtue in slow, quiet achievement will be more useful to you in life, precisely because they are broad and, in that, are broadly applicable. If, through your time at College and the influence of those close to you, you can come to see that understanding others is better than belittling difference, or that trying and failing is infinitely better than cynically refusing to participate, you will be developing a broad “background on which to view” things. Developed fully over time, a broad view of the world based on the sound principles of liberal education will provide you an enduring lens through which you can make sense of the particularities and vagaries of life. It will mean that you can view failure as an inevitable thing that we all have to face in life, rather than a personal affront from a world which owes you something (hint, it doesn’t).

So, that’s my argument for teaching things that are irrelevant and useless. I like they’re the most important things you will learn in school. You might disagree with me about this and argue that school should develop more practical skills that are directly useful in work. That’s okay, and we can discuss this and disagree about it. But in doing so, we’ll be using the very tools of rhetoric and empathy and debate that are not directly relevant to work and have no immediate practical application.

The end of the year of course sees the College farewell a number of staff. I would like to thank Brigita Keiller, Pauline Cowland, Tzu Winstanley, Graham Lewis, and Alison Churchill for their commitment to our school and for the kindness that they have shown to their students. Pam Schwartz one of most loved cleaners finished up twice this year, coming back to help out in between. Earlier in the year, our two College nurses Elizabeth Munro and Rachel Vallence both concluded their time at College after a long period caring for our day and boarding students. They all go with our thanks and our best wishes.

We also very shortly farewell our Year 12 cohort. As they now move to life beyond Chaucer Street, I thank them for their exceptional leadership of our younger students. Our Year 12s have been involved in *everything* this year, from dancing at assembly, to coaching younger sports teams, to spurring each other in their studies. In doing so have provided for those who follow them a sound example of what a Collegian should be and can be. One of my favourite poems is *The Choir Invisible* by George Eliot. It is a hopeful meditation from the speaker that when they die, they may become part of the ‘choir invisible’ – the group of those departed who provide guidance to those who remain through the recollection of their lives well lived. I think the sentiment is appropriate for our departing Year 12s.

*O May I join the choir invisible  
Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence: live  
In pulses stirr'd to generosity,  
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn  
For miserable aims that end with self,  
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
And with their mild persistence urge man's search  
To vaster issues.*

Year 12, you will continue to “live again in minds made better by [your] presence”. Good luck to our graduating students, you have added to the story of our school with great humour and good grace.

Let’s finish by returning then to where we started. We asked: how can we ensure that every graduate of our College has the knowledge, skills and dispositions to not only be happy in their own life, but to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others? We can do it by capitalising on our strengths, which is our strategy, which is the reason I sought to work here for you in the first place. My commitment to you is that every day I will work alongside the rest of our fantastic staff provide you unparalleled opportunities so that you can excel wherever your path from schools leads – whether that be back down a familiar farm road, or to university in Warrnambool, or Melbourne, or Boston, or Cambridge.

We exist now in a world where it is so easy to shrink and to be small. It is easy to shrink to the echo chamber of similar views, or to the comfort of the social credit that comes from belittling rather



than seeking to understand. But it is rarely good to do what is easy or what is small. I ask you to look up to the horizon of broad ideas that will teach you nothing specifically useful, but which will help you to navigate your life ahead with understanding, with grace, and with goodness, accomplishing more than might be reasonably expected, right here in Hamilton.

Thank you.